

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK ROADS & BRIDGES,  
NORTHSHORE ROAD  
(Lakeshore Drive) (Road to Nowhere)  
(Bryson City-Monteith Road)  
1 mile spur at Fontana Dam and Bryson City to Noland Creek  
Gatlinburg Vicinity  
Sevier County  
Tennessee

HAER NO. TN-35-I

HAER  
TENN  
78-GATV  
6I-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
P.O. Box 37127  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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Location: Great Smoky Mountains National Park,  
North Carolina, between Fontana Dam/  
Bryson City and Noland Creek

Date of Construction: 1940s-70s

Type of Structure: Roadway, Bridges, Tunnels and Landscapes

Use: National Park Transportation System

Engineer: U.S. Bureau of Public Roads and National  
Park Service

Fabricator/Builder: Various private and public contractors

Owner: U.S. Department of the Interior,  
National Park Service, Great Smoky  
Mountains National Park

Significance: Now consisting of only a short spur into  
the park, the Northshore Road was  
originally intended to extend from  
Bryson City to Fontana Village.  
Construction on the road was  
discontinued by the Park Service in 1976  
to preserve the wilderness in the  
southwestern section of the park. Local  
residents still protesting the  
cancellation of the project have  
recently erected a sign reading,  
"Welcome to the Road to Nowhere, A  
Broken Promise, 1943 - ?"

Project Information: Documentation was conducted during the  
summer of 1996 under the co-sponsorship  
of HABS/HAER, Great Smoky Mountains  
National Park, the National Park Service  
Roads and Parkway Program and funded  
through the Federal Lands Highway

Program. Measured drawings were produced by Edward Lupyak, field supervisor, Matthew Regnier, Karen Young, and Dorota Sikora (ICOMOS intern, Poland). The historical reports were prepared by Cornelius Maher and Michael Kelleher. See also drawings and histories on related structures: Great Smoky Mountains National Park, TN-35; Newfound Gap Road, TN-35-A; Clingmans Dome Road, TN-35-B; Little River Road, TN-35-C; Cades Cove and Laurel Creek Roads, TN-35-D; Foothills Parkway, TN-35-E; Cataloochee Valley Road, TN-35-F; Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail, TN-35-G; Big Creek Road, TN-35-H; Cosby Park Road, TN-35-J; Deep Creek Road, TN-35-K; Greenbrier Road, TN-35-L; Heintooga Ridge and Balsam Mountain Roads, TN-35-M; Cataloochee Trail and Turnpike, TN-35-N; Rich Mountain Road, TN-35-O; Elkmont Road, TN-35-P; Loop Over Bridge, TN-35-Q; Smokemont Bridge, TN-35-R; Elkmont Vehicle Bridge, TN-35-S; and Luten Bridges, TN-35-T.

### *Introduction*

Northshore Road was originally intended to run through Great Smoky Mountains National Park in North Carolina from Bryson City to Fontana Village, traversing the area north of Fontana Lake. However, after starting the road, the Park Service decided against despoiling the wild southwestern section of the park by putting a road through it. As a result, Northshore Road is currently only a short spur into the park approximately 2.5 miles from Bryson City.

After entering Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Northshore Road, running east-west, is relatively nondescript for the first 1.5 miles. At this point, an overlook is located on the south side of the road offering a beautiful view of the Tuckasegee River, which has been dammed near Fontana Village by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) to create Fontana Lake. The road then climbs the ridges running north-south in this area, and reaches an overlook at 3.3 miles. A parking lot for the Noland Creek Trail is located at the 5-mile point, past which the road crosses Noland Creek.

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Northshore Road ends at 5.8 miles, where the roadway continues but a gate prohibits further vehicle travel. A parking area is located in this area for hikers. From this point, the road continues 0.4 mile to the 375' long tunnel which was to have taken motorists through Forney Ridge as the Northshore Road continued toward Fontana Village. Although closed to motorists, the pavement continues through the tunnel, ending just beyond its west side.

*Construction of the Northshore Road*

The construction of Northshore Road, also referred to as the "Road to Nowhere," began with the TVA's plan to build a dam on the Tuckasegee River south of Great Smoky Mountains National Park during World War II. For management purposes, the TVA proposed to turn over to the Park Service 44,000 acres of land that lay between the park and Fontana Lake, which would be created by the dam. Complicating this situation was the fact that North Carolina Route 288, which ran on the north side of the river between Bryson City and Fontana Village, would flood and require replacement when the river was dammed. Therefore, in July 1943,

an agreement was reached between the Department of the Interior, the TVA, the state of North Carolina, and Swain County, North Carolina, in which the TVA agreed to turn the 44,000 acres over to the Park Service in order for it to be added to Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and Interior agreed to build a 30-mile road to replace Route 288. The exchange of land between the TVA and the Park Service took place on November 1, 1944, and the gates of Fontana Dam were closed on November 7.<sup>1</sup> However, these 44,000 acres were not formally added to the park until April 1950.<sup>2</sup>

The first work on a road around Fontana Lake was begun by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. A unit of the Corps arrived in the park on December 2, 1943, to construct a "pioneer road" as a training exercise.<sup>3</sup> The project did not go smoothly and was abandoned on February 2, 1944.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, November 1944; GSMNP.

<sup>2</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, April 1950; GSMNP.

<sup>3</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, January 1944; GSMNP.

<sup>4</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, March 1944; GSMNP.

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The first formal construction work on Northshore Road, a 1-mile spur at Fontana Dam, was begun on October 13, 1947, by the E.W. Grannis Company.<sup>5</sup> This \$239,912 project was completed on September 7, 1948.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, Fontana Lake receded to a point that portions of the former North Carolina Route 288 were above the water line. The state opened the road to Noland Creek between September 27 1947, and March 8, 1948.<sup>7</sup>

No further work was carried out on Northshore Road until 1959, when North Carolina built a 2.5 mile section from Bryson City to the park boundary in preparation for the continuation of work on the road by the federal government.<sup>8</sup> The following year, construction in the park resumed, and on August 7, 1960, the W.B. Dillard Construction Company of Sylva, North Carolina, began a \$504,987 project to build the 2.55 mile section of the road from

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<sup>5</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, September 1947; GSMNP.

<sup>6</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, September 1948; GSMNP.

<sup>7</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, April 1948; GSMNP.

<sup>8</sup> National Park Service, *Transportation Concepts, Great Smoky Mountains National Park*, 1971, 2; Roads Vertical File; GSMNP Library.

the park boundary west to Canebrake Branch.<sup>9</sup> As work progressed, the BPR discovered that the fill on which the road was being built was "setting and cracking" because it had been placed over underground springs. As a result, the rock placed in the fill began to disintegrate. In order to correct this problem, rather than place the road on fill in order to build over the difficult terrain in the area, in May 1963, the contractor was allowed to flatten the slopes on which the road was being built.<sup>10</sup> The project was completed on August 20, 1963.<sup>11</sup>

Construction of the next section of Northshore Road, 2.5 miles to a proposed marina on Fontana Lake, was to have begun in 1961.<sup>12</sup> No work began on this project that year, however two other sections were planned for 1962, the 3-mile Bryson-Goldmine Branch section near the park boundary, and the 2.9-mile section from Canebrake Branch to Noland Creek. This last part of the Northshore Road was to include a tunnel, and core drilling was

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<sup>9</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, July 1960; GSMNP.

<sup>10</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, May 1962; GSMNP.

<sup>11</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, August 1963; GSMNP.

<sup>12</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, July 1960; GSMNP.



begun by the E.J. Longyear Company of Minneapolis, Minnesota in July 1961.<sup>13</sup> This work was completed in October 1961.<sup>14</sup>

These projects continued to be delayed and altered. In August 1963, construction began on a 2.135-mile section of road from the completed roadway at Canebrake Branch towards Noland Creek and Goldmine Branch. This \$627,572 project was undertaken by the H.F. Ramsey Company of Asheville, North Carolina,<sup>15</sup> and completed on August 23, 1965.<sup>16</sup> The completed 5-mile section of the Northshore Road was referred to as the Bryson City-Fontana Road in anticipation of the day it would reach all the way to the Fontana Dam. The section was opened to the public on October 1, 1965.<sup>17</sup>

Further construction of the Northshore Road was delayed as the issue of whether it was appropriate to build a road through the untrammelled southwestern section of Great Smoky Mountains

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<sup>13</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, July 1961; GSMNP.

<sup>14</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, October 1961; GSMNP.

<sup>15</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, August 1963; GSMNP.

<sup>16</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, August 1965; GSMNP.

<sup>17</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, October 1965; GSMNP.

National Park was debated further. In 1964, Congress passed the Wilderness Act, a ground breaking piece of legislation which created the Wilderness Preservation System, under which federal lands were designated as wilderness and protected from all future development. The first area to be considered for wilderness designation under the new law was Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which the Park Service surveyed for wilderness eligible land in 1965. As a result of this study, the agency found that nearly half of the park's 512,000 acres fit the criteria for preservation in the wilderness system.<sup>18</sup>

The Park Service held hearings on the designation of wilderness in Great Smoky Mountains National Park in 1966, at which vocal factions both supporting and opposing wilderness were present. The supporters of wilderness were largely conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts. Opponents were residents of Swain County, North Carolina, who wanted to prevent the section of the park in which the Northshore Road was to be

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<sup>18</sup> "The Great Smokies Park and the Wilderness Act," *The Living Wilderness*, Autumn 1965, 3.

built from being declared wilderness, which would have made completion of the road impossible.<sup>19</sup>

In order to have sections of Great Smoky Mountains National Park designated wilderness, and offer an alternative to completing Northshore Road, Park Superintendent George Fry proposed the construction of a trans-mountain road which would run approximately 35 miles from Bryson City, North Carolina, over the ridge of the Smoky Mountains, to Townsend, Tennessee. By constructing this road rather than one around Fontana Lake, the superintendent hoped that the southwestern section of the park would remain roadless, and the residents of Swain County would be satisfied that their area was receiving the economic benefits of a road from their community into the heart of the Smokies.<sup>20</sup> However, on December 10, 1967, Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall decided in favor of full protection for the western half of

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<sup>19</sup> Willard Yarbrough, "Hikers Propose Two Wilderness Areas in Smokies Instead of Six," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 1 May 1966, np.

<sup>20</sup> Willard Yarbrough, "Hikers Propose Two Wilderness Areas in Smokies Instead of Six," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 1 May 1966, np. National Park Service, *Transportation Concepts, Great Smoky Mountains National Park*, 1971, 14; Roads Vertical File; GSMNP Library.

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Great Smoky Mountains National Park and against building the trans-mountain road or completing the Northshore Road. Instead, to appease Swain County, the Park Service planned to continue the Northshore Road west for several miles to Monteith Branch and build a marina on Fontana Lake.<sup>21</sup> In January 1968, George Hartzog, the Director of the Park Service, added that the Blue Ridge Parkway might be extended to the proposed road to Monteith Branch.<sup>22</sup> In response to the Secretary's decision, Swain County residents sued the federal government for breach of the 1943 agreement to build a road around Fontana Lake.<sup>23</sup> Northshore Road at this time was referred to as the Bryson City-Monteith Road to reflect its new destination at the Monteith Marina. Work on the road began in July 1968 by Cowin and Company. The \$1,755,761 project was to include a bridge over Noland Creek and

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<sup>21</sup> Staff Meeting Minutes, December 19, 1967; Box Staff Minutes; GSMNP.

<sup>22</sup> Staff Meeting Minutes, January 23, 1968; Box Staff Minutes; GSMNP.

<sup>23</sup> Willard Yarbrough, "Swain County to Sue U.S. Over Fontana Road Pact," *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, 4 February 1968, b-2.

a tunnel, the core of which had been drilled in 1961.<sup>24</sup> Work on the tunnel was in the area of Goldmine Branch, and local residents who believed that the creek received its name from a goldmine which once operated in the area, asked the Park Service if they could pick up rock from the excavation. The agency refused the request, stating that there was never a goldmine in the area.<sup>25</sup> Noland Creek Bridge was begun in October 1968,<sup>26</sup> and the tunnel in November.<sup>27</sup> Both the bridge and the tunnel, except for the tunnel portals, were completed in January or February 1970.<sup>28</sup> The full road project was completed on September 9, 1970.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Monthly Status Report, February 1970; Maintenance Division Files; Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

<sup>25</sup> Staff Meeting Minutes, February 6, 1968; Box Staff Minutes; GSMNP.

<sup>26</sup> Staff Meeting Minutes, October 1, 1968; Box Staff Minutes; GSMNP.

<sup>27</sup> Superintendent's Monthly Report, November 19, 1968; Box Staff Minutes; GSMNP.

<sup>28</sup> Monthly Progress Report, February 1970; Maintenance Division Files; Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

<sup>29</sup> Monthly Progress Report, September 1970; Maintenance Division Files; Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

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Plans for the Northshore Road tunnel portals were produced by the Park Service's Denver Service Center in 1972.<sup>30</sup> Construction on the \$174,142 project was begun on July 25, 1973, by Troitino and Brown Construction Company of Asheville<sup>31</sup> and completed on July 3, 1974.<sup>32</sup>

In 1973 and 1974, the Park Service was planning the construction of the last 1-mile section of Northshore Road to Monteith Branch. Great Smoky Mountains National Park received a copy of the latest plans for the road, reviewed and commented on them, and submitted them to the Park Service's Southeast Regional Office on February 14, 1974. At this point, the project was waiting for the completion of an environmental impact statement. However, the Park Service decided against any further construction on Northshore Road, and in May 1976, the project was

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<sup>30</sup> Staff Meeting Minutes, August 1, 1972; Box Staff Minutes; GSMNP.

<sup>31</sup> Monthly Status Report, July 1973; Maintenance Division Files; Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

<sup>32</sup> Monthly Progress Report, July 1974; Maintenance Division Files; Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

canceled. The regional office recommended that the park use the money for repairs to Newfound Gap Road.<sup>33</sup>

In support of the Park Service's stand on protecting Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Tennessee Senator Jim Sasser introduced a bill in Congress in December 1977 to designate 475,000 acres of the park as wilderness, thereby making resumption of the Northshore Road project impossible. At the behest of Swain County residents in June 1978, North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms filibustered the bill; as a result, no wilderness was designated. To date, the 512,000-acre park has no federally designated wilderness.

A January 1995 statement by Great Smoky Mountains National Park states that under the park's 1985 General Management Plan, the Park Service "has no plans" to complete the missing 21 miles of the Northshore Road "because of environmental and economic concerns." These include: the "probability that road construction would expose extremely acidic Anakeesta rock, which produces acids and heavy metals that are leached by rainfall and

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<sup>33</sup> Monthly Status Report, May 1976; Maintenance Division Files; Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

kill aquatic life;" the fact that continuing the road over an "area containing crumbling, faulted, and unstable rock...would require extensive cuts and fills;" and, the cost of completing the road was estimated to \$125 million. Efforts to overcome the controversy in North Carolina over the road have been sought. Suggestions include one bill offered in Congress to continue the road and another to settle the matter by compensating Swain County for the flooded North Carolina Route 228 with a \$16 million cash payment. The Park Service supports "a cash settlement in lieu of the road." To date, Congress has not acted on the cash settlement.<sup>34</sup> However, in July 1996, Senator Helms introduced legislation which would have Congress appropriate funds to complete Northshore Road.

Local residents resent what they consider the Park Service's broken promise regarding the Northshore Road and have erected a sign in protest. Standing just outside the park entrance, the hand-painted sign announces:

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<sup>34</sup> Briefing Statement, North Shore Road Issue Settlement (North Carolina), January 11, 1995; Northshore-Transmountain Road, 1992-Present Vertical File; GSMNP Library.



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Welcome to the Road to Nowhere

A Broken Promise

1943 - ?

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